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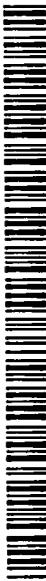
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(54) Title: INTERNET ENHANCED DRY-CLEANING SYSTEM

(57) Abstract: An Internet-enhanced method of operating a dry-cleaning business. A customer creates an account with the business by inputting data via the business' website. The data may include personal information, service preferences (e.g., starch), and notification preferences. The customer may initiate dry-cleaning or laundry service via the website or in person at a business branch location. In the former case, a business employee will come to the designated address to pick-up the service items. While a service request is being processed, the customer may modify the request, for example, to indicate that service items which were to be picked up at the branch location should be delivered to an address designated by the customer. The website is supported by a server which can also help locate lost items.

Internet Enhanced Dry-cleaning System

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a system and method for transacting business over the Internet and more particularly to a method for using the Internet to enhance a dry-cleaning business.

Background of the Invention

It is frequently noted that society has not truly enjoyed the benefits of so-called labor saving devices. New-fangled inventions such as the carpet sweeper, dish-washer, and washing machine have only increased the time available for suburban parents to drive their children to soccer practice and other after-school activities without having provided more leisure time for them to sit at home doing something other than housekeeping. In the office, facsimile machines and e-mail have decreased response times and pushed up deadlines rather than relieving pressure on deadline driven professionals.

As our lives become more hectic, we are constantly in search of assistance to reduce the time required for the basic tasks of daily living - shopping, cleaning, paying bills, etc. Supermarkets and food producers were among the earliest to notice the increased hurry of daily life, providing pre-cut vegetables and pre-cooked meals to busy consumers. The supermarkets continued the trend with on-line shopping, where a customer could click off items on the store's Internet site to create a list of groceries which would then be delivered to his or her home. As the availability of on-line shopping services increases, marketing experts predict a decline in in-person

shopping at department stores and malls and increased web-based ordering of goods ranging from books to clothing to housewares.

The ordering functions described above indicate one way in which the Internet has made receiving goods and services more convenient. While 24-hour phone ordering has been available for many services, such as department store and catalog ordering, for years, the Internet has made it easier for people to place orders without sitting on hold on a phone for a significant length of time. However, the above services only handle a product or service which is delivered to the customer. These Internet-based services, for the most part, have not dealt with items which must be received from the consumer, processed, and returned. Among the most common items which a customer takes to a service provider are clothing, automobiles, and electronic equipment such as VCRs. Because the dry-cleaners, garages, and repair shops that service these items do not have the extended hours of many supermarkets and drugstores, it can be difficult for someone who has a job of his or her own to drop off an item for servicing during business hours. Accordingly, it is desirable to have an Internet-based service designed to meet the particular needs of someone seeking the convenience of not having to leave work early in order to reach a service provider and drop-off or pick up an item before closing time.

Summary of the Invention

In one aspect, the invention is a method for the operation of an Internet dry-cleaning business. The method comprises the steps of providing a business equipped to receive an article from a customer, providing a server adapted to receive a request from a user, receiving a request from the user, and fulfilling the request. The business is equipped to receive or return the article at either a store location or a customer address. The article may comprise a dry-cleanable item, a launderable item, or an article of clothing.

The method may further comprise identifying the user. In one embodiment, this may comprise providing a prompt to the user and comparing a user input to confidential information stored in a database disposed in the server. The prompt may comprise a question previously provided by the user to the database, and the confidential information may comprise an answer to the question.

The request may be for a display of information, a change of information, or manipulation of the article. The information may comprise customer-generated or business-generated information. Business-generated information may comprise statement information, order information, and/or sales history. The sales history may comprise order information for a set period of time, the length of which may be customer-generated information.

Customer-generated information may comprise billing information, confidential information, display preferences, personal information, service initiation preferences, article delivery preferences, starch preferences, finish preferences, and/or notification preferences. Billing information may comprise a credit card number and expiration date. The method may further comprise, within a preset

interval of the expiration date, notifying the customer that the billing information should be updated.

Notification preferences may comprise a time to notify the customer that service has been initiated, that an article is ready for delivery, that an article has been delivered, that a request has been received, that a request has been fulfilled, and/or how to notify the customer. The customer-generated information may comprise first and second service initiation or delivery preferences. The method may further comprise designating separate notification preferences for the two service initiation or article delivery preferences. The customer may also temporarily change the notification preferences for a specific period of time.

Service initiation preferences may comprise a location where the article is received from the customer or a time when the article is received. Likewise, article delivery preferences may comprise a location or a time when the article is returned.

Manipulation may comprise storing, retrieving from storage, dry-cleaning, laundering, starching, finishing, initiating article service, delivering the article, repairing the article, or placing the article in a customer-accessible locker. Initiating article service may comprise picking up the article at a primary or secondary address or receiving the article at a store location. Delivering the article may comprise delivering the article at a primary or secondary address, providing the article to the customer at a store location, or depositing the article in a locker at a store location.

The method may further comprise saving a description of the article in a database. The method may still further comprise comparing a description of a lost article to the description in the database.

The method may further comprise notifying the user of a status of the request.

The status may comprise receipt of the request, fulfillment of the request, receipt of the article, return of the article, request fulfillment cost, and/or order information.

Notifying may comprise creating a notice accessible to the customer via a website, sending an e-mail message, sending a message via standard mail, phoning the customer, or sending a message via facsimile.

The method may further comprise displaying customer-generated information and receiving request-specific changes to the customer-generated information from the user. The request may be to change part of a previous request. Fulfilling a request for a display of information may comprise providing information to a customer in a viewable, printable, or downloadable format.

The request may be to evaluate whether an article is salvageable. The method may further comprise creating business-generated information concerning salvageability of the article. The method may still further comprise estimating a cost to clean the article, cleaning the article, and creating business-generated information regarding the estimate.

The method may further comprise providing the customer a customized promotion based on the customer-generated information or the business-generated information. The promotion may be provided via a website, electronic mail, standard mail, facsimile, or phone.

The user may be a customer or an employee of the business. The request may be received via a website supported by the server or a server-supported interface at a store location.

In another aspect, the invention is a server system for processing a request. The system comprises a database storing information for a plurality of users and a user interface configured to receive a request concerning an article belonging to a customer. The user may be a customer or an employee of the business, and the user interface may be a webpage. The request may comprise a request-specific change to a default request. The system may comprise a user interface configured to receive a description of the article or information regarding salvageability. The server system may be configured to automatically notify the customer, for example, that billing information needs to be updated. In another embodiment, the server may notify the customer according to the notification preferences.

Brief Description of the Drawing

The invention is described with reference to the several figures of the drawing, in which,

Figure 1 is a flow chart of a customer's progress through a website of a business conducted in accordance with one embodiment of the invention.

Detailed Description

Figure 1 describes a customer's interaction with a website for a service provider and the response of the provider's database to input from the customer. The customer initiates contact with the provider by accessing its website. The website is supported by a server which has access to the database. The server need not be at the business or even owned by the business. Anyone accessing the website can learn about the provider, the services it provides to its customers, basic information about

store location, and, most importantly, how to become a customer. If a potential customer wishes to create an account with the provider, he or she may access a new customer profile page. On this page, the customer can input personal information such as name, address, e-mail address, and phone number, for example, via a web form. The customer may also be prompted to enter a secondary address and phone number, such as a work address. At this time, the customer may also input preferred billing information, such as a credit card number and expiration date. If a credit card is used, the server may send the customer a reminder when the card is about to expire, requesting that the customer update the billing information. Alternatively, the website may prompt the customer to input new credit card information at a given interval before or after the expiration date. The customer may also choose to pay via automatic withdrawals from a personal bank account or to receive a monthly statement. The statement may include information such as the customer's sales history for, for example, the previous month, and prior and outstanding payments.

In a preferred embodiment, the provider is a dry-cleaning business, and the customer will also be prompted to input dry-cleaning preferences on the profile page. For example, the customer may choose to drop off clothing at a store location or may have the clothing picked up at either the home or work address. The customer may also retrieve cleaned clothing at the store address where the clothing was dropped off or a different store address, or the clothing may be delivered at the home or work address. The customer may describe preferences for both retail (drop-off and pick-up at store location) or pick-up/delivery service (by the business). Preferences for pick-up/delivery service may include convenient pick-up and delivery times. If the customer prefers to pick up cleaned items at a store location but does not think that

he or she will be able to do so during normal business hours, a request may be entered into the customer profile to have the clothing placed into a locker which is accessible after normal business hours. The locker may be located at any store location, which location may be a staffed retail or a satellite "locker-only" location. Of course, the customer may have the clothing placed in the locker, especially at a satellite location, for pick-up during the day. The customer may also mix the retail and pick-up/delivery options when the initial order is placed. A customer dropping off items at a store may request that they be delivered to a home address; and a customer requesting pick-up may request that the completed order be left at a store location to be picked up by the customer on the way home from work.

The business can also establish regional store locations which serve as pick-up/delivery/locker sites, such as a neighborhood or office building. The website may have a specific page for each neighborhood, building, or other region. Specific services or promotions may be targeted to the occupants of the regional areas. Alternatively, a base service can be set up in each of these areas. For example, the area may have pick-up on Tuesdays and delivery on Fridays, and customers may have the option of dropping off or receiving their items at the regional outlet on those days. Such an option would be especially convenient for customers using a regional outlet in their office building. While customers would still have the option to have clothing picked up or dropped off anytime (and any location) they would be able to have service automatically on a specific day each week. In an alternative embodiment, a given customer may have the option of pick-up each Monday or Tuesday and delivery on Thursday or Friday at a given location. In this embodiment, the customer may choose to be notified the evening before the designated pick-up

day and reminded to prepare clothing or other items for receipt by the business.

Such a notification may also be made by e-mail, fax, or the business' website.

The customer may also input starch preferences (*e.g.*, no starch, light starch, or normal starch) or finish preferences (*e.g.*, military creases, return on hanger, folded in bags, or folded in boxes, etc.). The customer may also choose to be notified (for example, by telephone, e-mail, standard mail, fax, the business's website, etc.) when items are picked up, delivered, dropped-off at a store location, or ready to be picked up at a store location. Pick-up notification may include an inventory of what the business received. The customer may decide when to be reminded that an item is ready to be picked up at a store location (*e.g.*, when the item is ready or four days later). Separate notification preferences may be described for both the retail and pick-up/delivery modes, and default notification preferences may be established by the business which the customer can change later. In a preferred embodiment, historical sales information is retained for a given customer, so that the customer may choose how much information (*e.g.*, for the previous month or year) should be displayed upon request. In addition, customer may elect to change the notification preferences for a given period of time. For example, the customer may request not to receive any notifications, such as the weekly service reminder discussed above, while on vacation.

The information in the profile is stored in a database accessible by the business's server. The server generates an account number and password and notifies the customer. Initially, the password may be randomly generated by the server, chosen by the customer during input of the profiling information, or automatically generated based on the profile information. For example, an initial

password may be the last four digits of the customer's phone number. Because customers frequently forget their passwords, the server may include an alternative method of identifying the customer. For example, as part of the profile information, the customer may input a prompt which reminds the customer of the password when delivered by the server. Alternatively, the customer may input, as part of the profile information, a question to be asked by the server and a correct answer to be delivered by the customer when so prompted by the server. The question-and-answer identifier provides an alternative identification method akin to the use of mother's maiden name by many credit card companies. Moreover, the proper answer is more likely to be known solely by the customer than his or her mother's maiden name. The password, prompt, and answer (where appropriate) form the customer's confidential information.

Once the customer has an account number and password, he or she may access certain personalized areas of the business's website. For example, the customer may view and change his or her personal information or customer service information, including, for example, the password or finish preferences. The customer may also view and download order information for a specific order or a sales history for a period of time. For example, if dry-cleaning is a tax deductible expense for a customer (*i.e.*, if the customer has a required uniform for work), at the end of the calendar or other tax year, the customer might request that the server display and download the entire year's sales history. Alternatively, the customer may view the sales history for the last few weeks to determine the status of various orders.

Of course, a customer may also place an order from the business's website. When the customer indicates a desire to place an order, the default ordering preferences appear on the computer screen. The customer may change certain preferences which will be particular to this order. For example, a customer who normally drops off clothing at a store address may decide, for this order, to have clothing picked up at home. Alternatively, a customer who normally has clothing delivered at home may choose to have the clothing delivered to the alternate address. In another example, a customer who normally requests light starch may request heavier starch or may request that shirts which are normally hung be folded and boxed in preparation for an upcoming business trip. Customers may also request special treatment of items such as wedding dresses or that a particular item be pressed only, not dry-cleaned. The customer indicates a preferred time for clothing to be picked up and/or delivered to a given address and submits the order. The server processes the order and dispatches an employee to pick up the clothing at the indicated address. The server also, if the customer prefers, sends an e-mail to the customer indicating that the order has been received and, later, that the items have been picked up. Such a notification may also be made by phone, fax, standard mail, the website, or any other communications method.

When the order is received, the server generates an order information entry for the database, indicating how many items were received and how they are to be processed, *e.g.*, laundry or dry-cleaning or both, and how much the service will cost. The order information is available on the customer's order information page and may also include information about the service mode (retail or pick-up/delivery) and order status. Historical order information is stored by the database and assembled into a

sales history for the customer. After the clothing has been cleaned or laundered, it is returned to the customer. If the clothing is delivered, the customer may be notified (e.g., via a communication means such as e-mail, phone, fax, standard mail, the website, etc.) that the clothing was delivered and how much the customer was charged for the service. Alternatively, the customer may be notified that the clothing is ready for pick-up at a store location. The customer may choose not to receive any of these communications or to receive a communication on a specific date. For example, if the customer is aware at the time of ordering that clothing will be available on the third day after the order, then the customer may decide that reminder on the third day is unnecessary but that one seven days thereafter would be particularly useful. As noted above, the customer may stop the notifications temporarily, for example, when the customer is out of town for an extended period.

In preferred embodiments, the customer may also change certain elements of a given order, even while it is being executed by the business. For example, if a customer had previously indicated that clothing would be picked up at a store during business hours, the customer may later change the order to request that the clothing be placed in a locker, delivered, or re-routed to another location. Use of the locker enables the customer to pick up clothing at a store location outside of normal business hours. The customer goes to the appropriate store location, inputs identifying information into an interface connected to the business's server, and is informed which locker the item is in. The locker may open automatically or may require the input of a password for access. Alternatively, a customer who had indicated that clothing would be picked up at one store location may change the order to pick up the clothing at a different location.

Order information is available to the customer even if service is initiated by dropping off clothing or other items at a store location. The order information is entered by an employee into the database via a user interface supported by the business's server when the items are dropped off; the customer may view the order information later via the website and change the delivery options. For example, if the customer had been planning on picking up the items but now needs them delivered, this can be indicated via the business's website. The server will notify the store location where the items are awaiting pick-up by the customer that they should be delivered to the customer instead. Alternatively, the customer may request that the items be moved from one store location to another so that they may be picked-up more conveniently, for example, if a customer has business or a soccer game near a particular store location. A customer may also choose to place an item in and out of storage via the business's website. For example, while viewing an order history, a customer can select an action box to place an order in storage or remove it from storage and return it to the customer via delivery or at a store location. Just as for regular laundry or dry cleaning service, the item may be placed in a locker for retrieval by the customer outside of normal business hours.

Customer-generated information, such as delivery and laundry preferences, and business-generated information, such as order information, need not be generated solely by the customer's interaction with the server through the website. A customer can create an account at a store location simply by having clothing cleaned. In this case, of course, the customer may not necessarily create a password or notification preferences, although all the customer-generated information can be entered at the store or on-line. A store employee enters the available information into

the database and provides the customer an account number. A computer-generated password, such as a random combination of characters or the last few (e.g., four) digits of the customer's phone number, may also be provided at this time. The customer, who might not have previously known about the website and the pick-up/delivery option, now has access to all the delivery options available to other customers. Indeed, every time a customer brings an item to a store location, a record is created which is accessible through the business's website.

Because almost all transactions are conducted via the website interface (and all transactions are entered into the database), specific data for each customer can be evaluated by the business. For example, if a customer has a number of household goods such as blankets or curtains cleaned, the server can, sometime later, either send an e-mail or create a promotion associated with a display of the customer's personal information inquiring whether the items should be cleaned again. The business may encourage yearly cleaning of the customer's curtains or ask if there is a matching comforter which needs to be cleaned. Alternatively, a customer may be offered a promotion offering to clean or launder a third item for free when two other items are serviced. Such promotions may be displayed on the website when the customer logs in or may be sent via regular mail or e-mail. The customer may, of course, choose not to receive such promotions.

One skilled in the art will be able to create appropriate webpages for the customer to interact with the business. Such webpages may be encoded by languages such as HTML, Java, and other programming languages which may define a webpage. However, the interface with the server and the database need not be

through a website; other interfaces, such as touch-screens or custom programmed interfaces, may be used as well.

The server need not be confined to processing orders for dry-cleaning, laundering or storage. Many dry-cleaning establishments can also arrange to have various clothing items, such as pants and shoes, repaired for customers. The customer can indicate via the website that certain items are to be picked up and repaired rather than cleaned. As for dry-cleaning and laundry, the server will notify the customer that the request and the items have been received and processed according to the customer's notification preferences. If the business provides an automatic service, such as button replacement for shirts or minor mends, this information may also be entered into the record for a given order, indicating to the customer that an automatic repair was performed and providing a record to the business of the quantity of such repairs in a given time.

As noted above, the customer will be provided with a variety of payment options, including automatic credit card billing and monthly statements. However, the server will also be able to display statement information from the customer's last bill. If the customer wishes, he or she may provide credit card or other payment data to pay the bill without having to mail a check to the business.

The server can be used not only to track a customer's order but to track items which have been separated from their original orders and lost. Identifying characteristics such as item type, color, collar type, and cuff type are inventoried into the database. As employees become aware that certain items have become lost, they can query the server to determine if a specific item has been found. This will save the employee the time of physically searching the items and will enable an item to be

located at one location by someone at a separate location. The employee can search on the above-mentioned characteristics to locate and retrieve a lost item. For example, a user interface at the store location may include an interactive menu listing characteristics of clothing, such as clothing type (*e.g.*, men's suit, dress, shirt, woman's loafer), color, fabric design (*e.g.*, pinstripe, floral), fabric type (*e.g.*, cotton, synthetic blend, linen), and other characteristics (*e.g.*, 3/4 sleeve, floor-length). The menu may also include non-clothing items such as comforters and curtains. An entry is created for each unmatched (to a customer) item, and an employee searching for a lost item need simply enter its characteristics into an interactive menu on the user interface. The characteristics are compared to those for any "found" items and the closest matches reported to the employee. If the user interface is a webpage, a click-menu may be used to enter and search on descriptions. Alternatively, digital images of unidentified items may be stored in the database. Then, when the employee queries about items having a certain characteristic, *e.g.*, a red shirt with three quarter sleeves, the server will display a collection of items having the desired characteristics. Of course, such a record may also be created for every item received by the business, not just those which cannot be matched to a customer.

The server may also be used to track items which are subject to claims due to fire, water, or smoke damage. For example, a third party organization may request that the business assist them in resolving garment claims due to fire, water, or smoke damage. The business will inventory the garments, evaluate whether the garments are salvageable, and clean the salvageable garments. For each garment, the business can create a record including, for example, a description of the item, the status of the item (*i.e.*, salvageable or not), estimated cost to clean the garment, and whether the

garment is ready to be returned to the third party organization. As each individual item is processed, its record may be updated. Again, information may be entered via a webpage or another interactive user interface. For example, the garments may be inventoried into the database when they are received from the third party. As the garments' salvageability is evaluated, the database will be updated, as it will after the salvageable items are cleaned. The database can also be used to track items which are being cleaned by the business at the request of a third party dry cleaning business which is using the business as a contractor. Each item may be associated with a customer number in the database so the third party can track the progress of its customer's orders.

Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from a consideration of the specification or practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with the true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for the operation of an Internet dry-cleaning business comprising:
 - providing a business equipped to receive an article from a customer and return the article to the customer;
 - providing a server adapted to receive a request from a user;
 - receiving a request from the user; and
 - fulfilling the request,

wherein the business is equipped to receive and return the article at either a store location or a customer address.
2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 - providing a prompt to the user; and
 - comparing a user input to confidential information stored in a database accessible by the server,

wherein the prompt comprises a question previously provided by the user to the database, and wherein the confidential information comprises a correct answer to the question.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the request is for a display of information, a change of information, or manipulation of the article.
4. The method of claim 3, wherein fulfilling a request for a display of information comprises providing information to a customer in a viewable, printable, or downloadable format.

5. The method of claim 3, wherein information comprises customer-generated information or business-generated information.
6. The method of claim 5, further comprising providing the customer a customized promotion based on the customer-generated information or the business-generated information.
7. The method of claim 6, wherein the promotion is provided via the business's website, e-mail, standard mail, facsimile, or phone.
8. The method of claim 5, wherein business-generated information comprises a member of the group consisting of statement information, order information, sales history, and any combination of the above.
9. The method of claim 8, wherein sales history comprises order information for a set period of time, and wherein a length of the set period of time is customer-generated information.
10. The method of claim 5, wherein:
customer-generated information comprises billing information,
billing information comprises a credit card number and expiration date, and

the method further comprises, within a preset interval of the expiration date, notifying the customer that the billing information should be updated.

11. The method of claim 3, wherein customer-generated information comprises a member of the group consisting of billing information, confidential information, display preferences, personal information, service initiation preferences, article delivery preferences, starch preferences, finish preferences, notification preferences, and any combination of the above.
12. The method of claim 11, wherein notification preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of when to notify the customer that service has been initiated, when to notify the customer that an article is ready for delivery, when to notify the customer that an article has been delivered, when to notify the customer that the request has been received, when to notify the customer that the request has been fulfilled, how to notify the customer, whether to notify the customer of a regular service day, and any combination of the above.
13. The method of claim 12, wherein the request is to temporarily modify the notification preferences for a set period of time.
14. The method of claim 12, wherein customer-generated information further comprises first and second service initiation preferences or first and second

article delivery preferences, and wherein the method further comprises designating separate notification preferences for the two service initiation or article delivery preferences.

15. The method of claim 11, wherein service initiation preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of a location where the article is received from the customer, a time when the article is received, and any combination of the above.
16. The method of claim 11, wherein article delivery preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of a location where the article is returned to the customer, a time when the article is returned, and any combination of the above.
17. The method of claim 3, wherein manipulation comprises a member of the group consisting of storing, retrieving from storage, dry-cleaning, laundering, starching the article, finishing the article, initiating article service, delivering the article, repairing the article, placing the article in a customer-accessible locker, and any combination of the above.
18. The method of claim 17, wherein initiating article service comprises a member of the group consisting of picking up the article at a primary address, picking up the article at a secondary address, and receiving the article at a store location.

19. The method of claim 17, wherein delivering the article comprises delivering the article to a primary address, delivering the article to a secondary address, providing the article to the customer at a store location, and depositing the article in a locker at a store location.
20. The method of claim 1 further comprising saving a description of the article in a database.
21. The method of claim 20, further comprising comparing a description of a lost article to the description in the database.
22. The method of claim 1, further comprising notifying the user of a status of the request.
23. The method of claim 22, wherein the status comprises a member of the group consisting of the request having been received, the request having been fulfilled, the article having been received from the customer, the article having been returned to the customer, a cost of fulfilling the request, order information, and any combination of the above.
24. The method of claim 22, wherein notifying comprises creating a notice accessible to the customer via a website, sending a message via standard mail, phoning the customer, or sending a message via facsimile.

25. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 - displaying customer-generated information; and
 - receiving request-specific changes to the customer-generated information from the user.
26. The method of claim 1, wherein the request is to change part of a previous request.
27. The method of claim 1, wherein the request is to evaluate whether an article is salvageable.
28. The method of claim 27, further comprising creating business-generated information concerning salvageability of the article.
29. The method of claim 27, further comprising:
 - estimating a cost to clean the article;
 - cleaning the article; and
 - creating business-generated information regarding the estimate, wherein the article is salvageable.
30. The method of claim 1, wherein:
 - the customer is a third-party business;

the method further comprises creating business-generated information regarding a customer of the third-party business; and
the server is configured to receive a request for the customer of the third-party business or the third-party business.

31. The method of claim 1, wherein the user is a customer or an employee of the business.
32. The method of claim 1, wherein the request can be received via a website supported by the server or server-supported interface at a store location.
33. The method of claim 1, wherein the article comprises a dry-cleanable item, a launderable item, or an article of clothing.
34. A server system for processing a request, comprising:
a database storing information for a plurality of users; and
a user interface configured to receive a request concerning an article belonging to a customer.
35. The server system of claim 34, wherein the request comprises a request-specific change to a default request.

36. The server system of claim 34, wherein the request is for an action comprising a member of the group consisting of storing, retrieving from storage, dry-cleaning, laundering, starching the article, finishing the article, initiating article service, delivering the article, and placing the article in a customer-accessible locker.
37. The server system of claim 34, further comprising a user interface configured to receive a description of the article.
38. The server system of claim 37, further comprising a plurality of descriptions, wherein the request is to compare a description of the article to the plurality of descriptions.
39. The server system of claim 34, wherein the request is to evaluate whether the article is salvageable.
40. The server system of claim 39, wherein the user interface is configured to receive information concerning salvageability of the article.
41. The server system of claim 40, wherein the user interface is configured to receive an estimated cost to clean the article and wherein the article is salvageable.

42. The server system of claim 34, further comprising a member of statement information, order information, sales history, and any combination of the above.
43. The server system of claim 42, wherein sales history comprises order information for a set period of time, and wherein a length of the set period of time is customer-generated information.
44. The server system of claim 34, further comprising a status of the request.
45. The server system of claim 44, wherein the status comprises a member of the group consisting of request having been received, the request having been fulfilled, the article having been received from the customer, the article having been returned to the customer, a cost of fulfilling the request, order information, and any combination of the above.
46. The server system of claim 34, wherein the user interface is configured to receive billing information comprising a credit card number and expiration date, and wherein the server is configured to generate a request to the customer that the billing information be updated within a time interval of the expiration date.
47. The server system of claim 34, wherein the user interface is configured to receive a member of the group consisting of display preferences, service

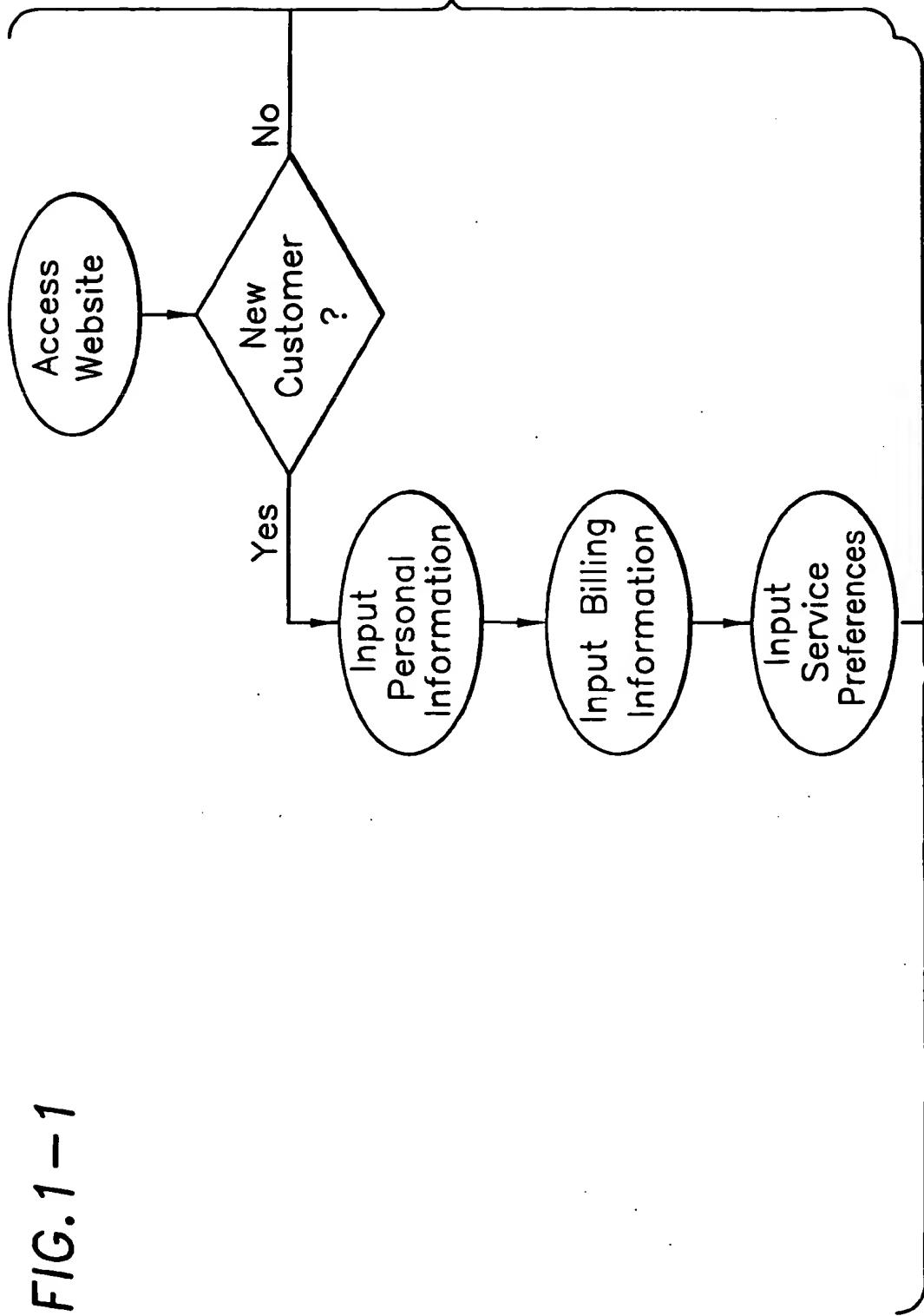
initiation preferences, article delivery preferences, starch preferences, finish preferences, notification preferences, and any combination of the above.

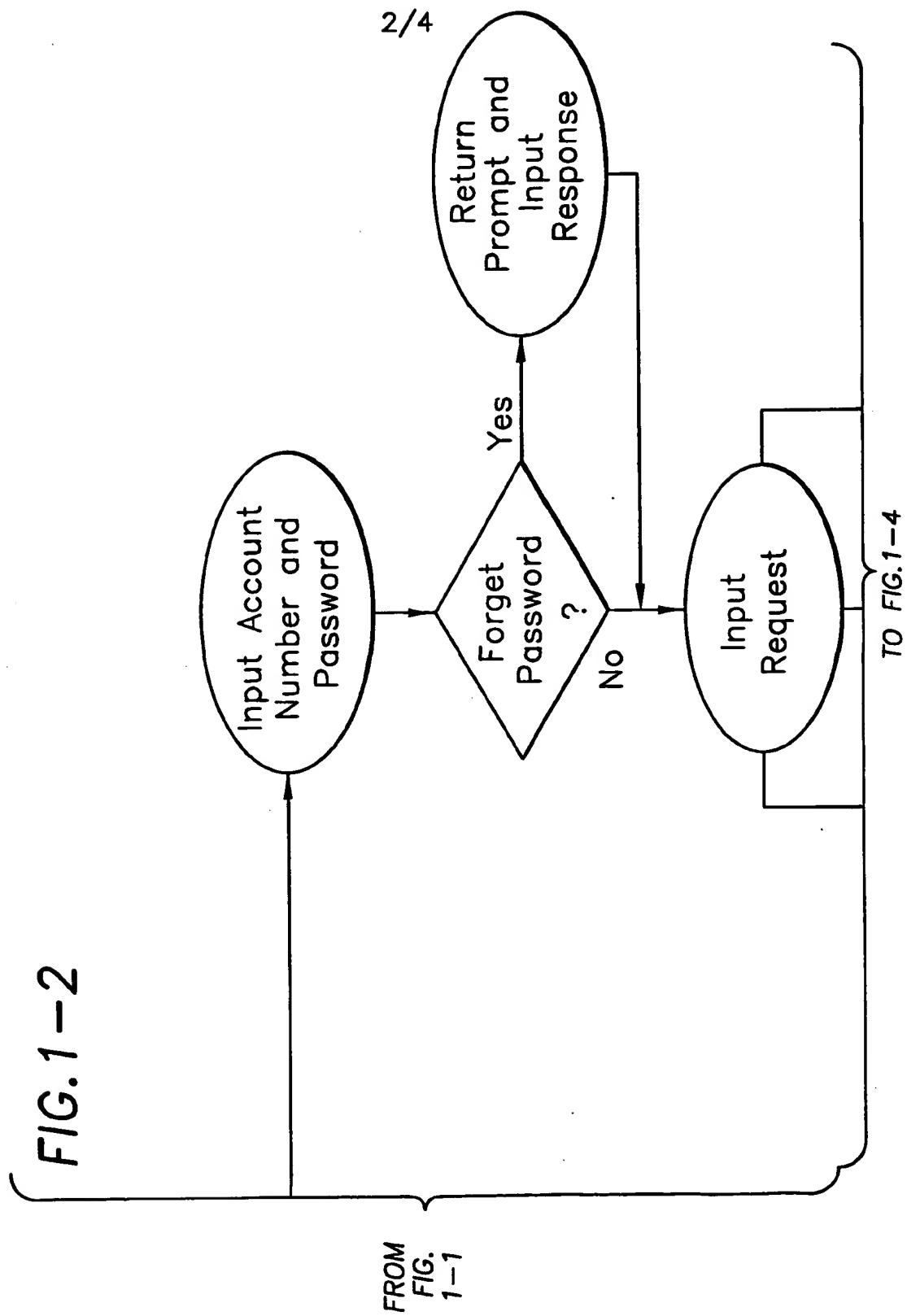
48. The server system of claim 47, wherein notification preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of when to notify the customer that service has been initiated, when to notify the customer that the article is ready for delivery, when to notify the customer that the article has been delivered, when to notify the customer that the request had been received, when to notify the customer that the request has been fulfilled, how to notify the customer, whether to notify the customer of a regular service initiation day, and any combination of the above.
49. The server system of claim 48, wherein the server system is configured to automatically generate a notification for the customer based on the notification preferences of the customer.
50. The server system of claim 48, wherein the server system is configured to automatically respond to a request to temporarily modify notification preferences for a specified period of time.
51. The server system of claim 47, wherein the user interface is configured to receive first and second service initiation preferences or first and second article delivery preferences, and wherein the user interface is configured to

receive separate notification preferences for the two service initiation or article delivery preferences.

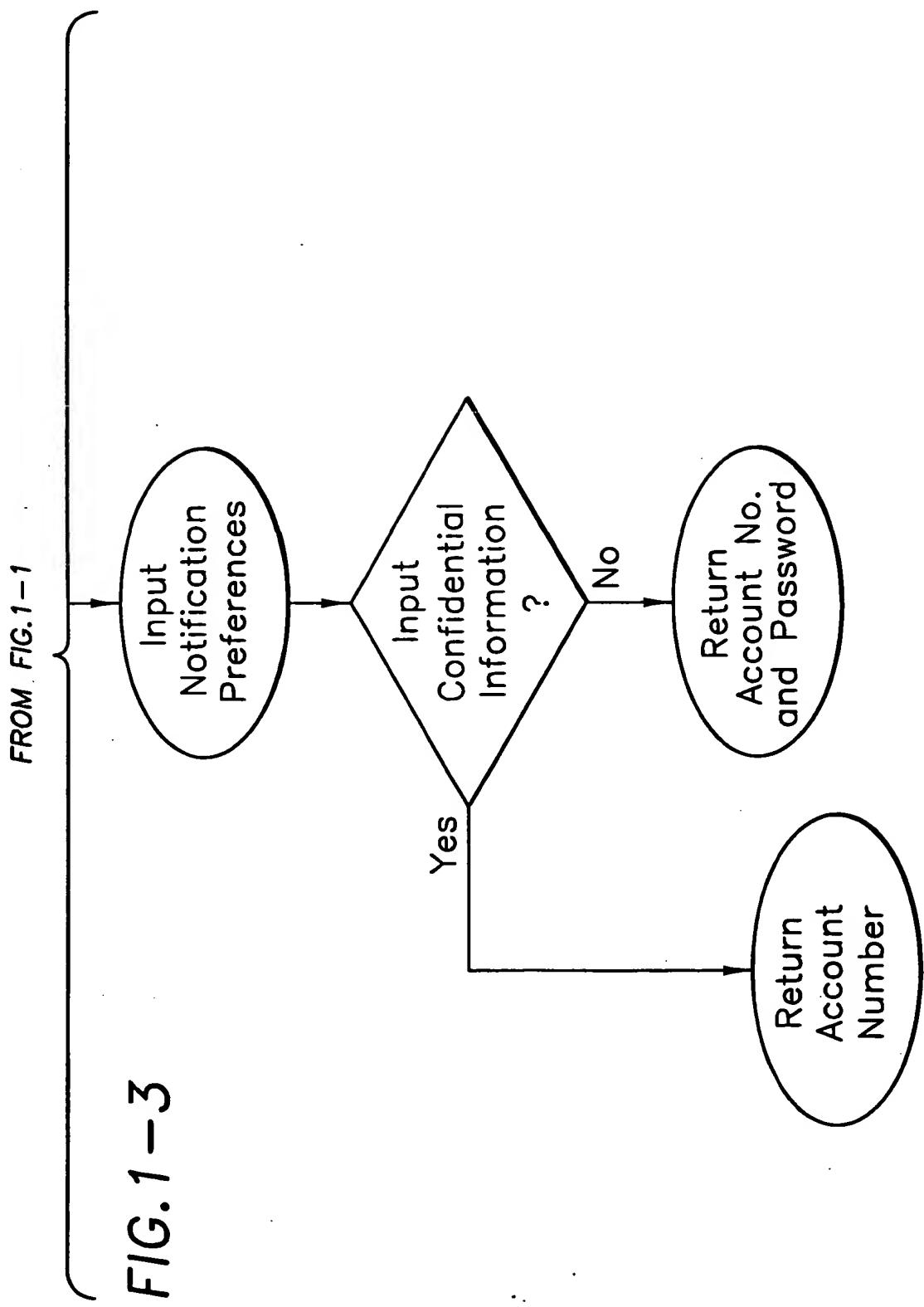
52. The server system of claim 47, wherein service initiation preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of a location where the article is received from the customer, a time when the article is received, and any combination of the above.
53. The server system of claim 47, wherein article delivery preferences comprise a member of the group consisting of a location where the article is returned to the customer, a time when the article is returned, and any combination of the above.
54. The server system of claim 34, wherein the article comprises a dry-cleanable item, a launderable item, or an article of clothing.
55. The server system of claim 34, wherein the user interface is a webpage.

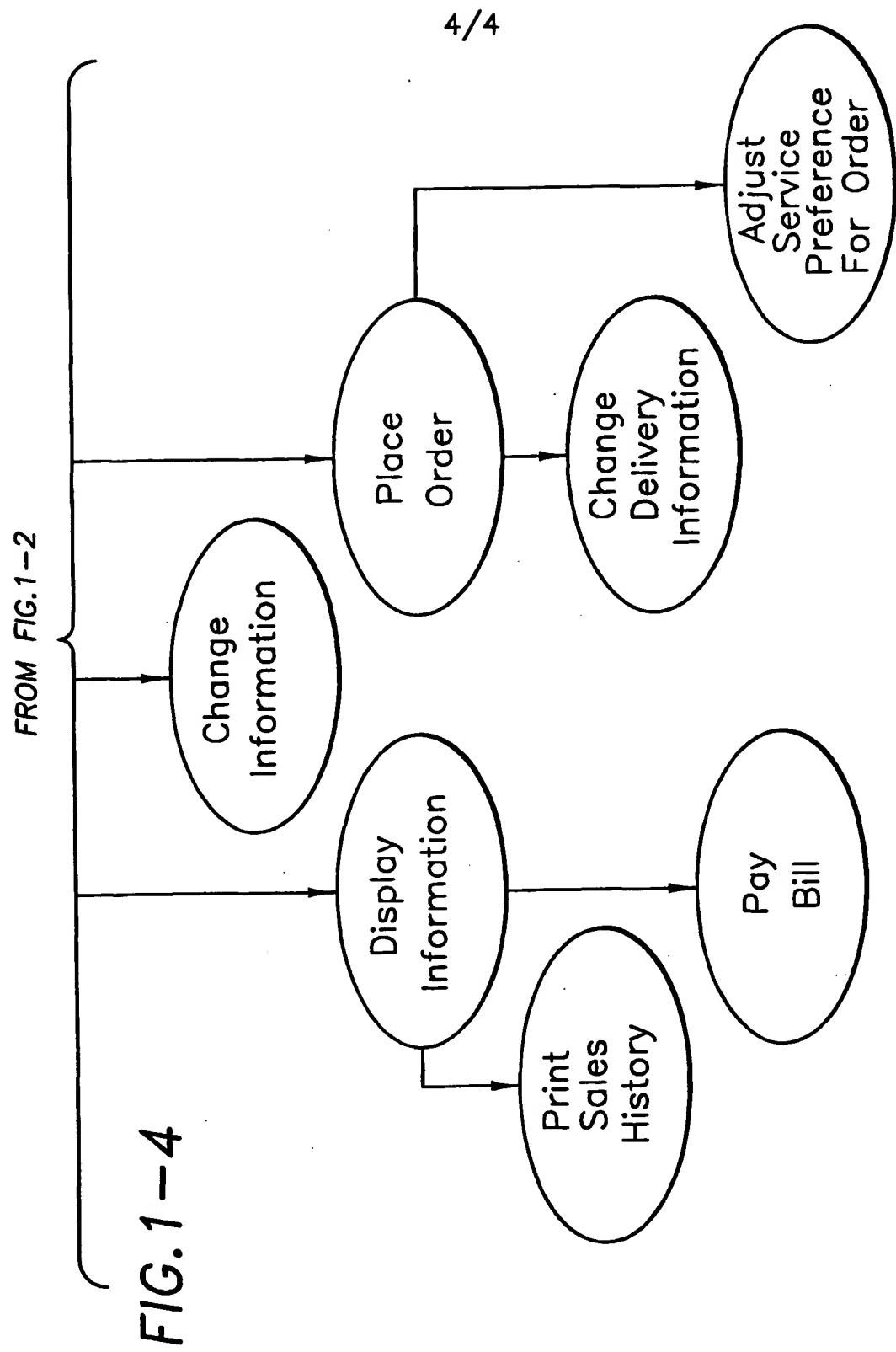
1/4

TO
FIG.
1-2



3/4





INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/10079

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(7) : G06F 17/60
US CL : 705/27

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 705/01, 705/26, 705/29, 705/40, 705/33, 705/400, 707/01, 707/200, 707/526, 707/10, 379/93.12, 379/93.25, 510/285

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
Please See Continuation Sheet

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 5,930,769 A (ROSE) 27 July 1999 (27.07.1999)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 20, 21, 25, 26, 33, 37, 54
X	US 6,064,980 A (JACOBI et al.) 16 May 2000 (16.05.2000).	6, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53
X	US 5,710,887 A (CHELLIAH et al.) 20 January 1998 (20.01.1998).	7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 36, 39, 44, 45
X	US 6,058,373 A (BLINN et al.) 02 May 2000 (02.05.2000).	8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 29, 32, 34, 35, 40, 41, 42, 43, 46, 55

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:

- "A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance
- "E" earlier application or patent published on or after the international filing date
- "L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)
- "O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means
- "P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T"

later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X"

document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y"

document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&"

document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search

08.06.2001

Date of mailing of the international search report

13 JUL 2001

Name and mailing address of the ISA/US

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Internal Application No.

PCT/US01/10079

Box I Observations where certain claims were found unsearchable (Continuation of Item 1 of first sheet)

This international report has not been established in respect of certain claims under Article 17(2)(a) for the following reasons:

1. Claim Nos.: 31
because they relate to subject matter not required to be searched by this Authority, namely:
whether the user is an employee or a customer does not impact the business method.
2. Claim Nos.:
because they relate to parts of the international application that do not comply with the prescribed requirements to such an extent that no meaningful international search can be carried out, specifically:
3. Claim Nos.:
because they are dependent claims and are not drafted in accordance with the second and third sentences of Rule 6.4(a).

Box II Observations where unity of invention is lacking (Continuation of Item 2 of first sheet)

This International Searching Authority found multiple inventions in this international application, as follows:

1. As all required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers all searchable claims.
2. As all searchable claims could be searched without effort justifying an additional fee, this Authority did not invite payment of any additional fee.
3. As only some of the required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant, this international search report covers only those claims for which fees were paid, specifically claims Nos.:
4. No required additional search fees were timely paid by the applicant. Consequently, this international search report is restricted to the invention first mentioned in the claims; it is covered by claims Nos.:

Remark on Protest The additional search fees were accompanied by the applicant's protest.
 No protest accompanied the payment of additional search fees.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.

PCT/US01/10079

Continuation of B. FIELDS SEARCHED Item3: USPAT, US-PGPUB, EPO, JPO, DERWENT, IBM TDB Search terms: internet, sales, shipping, receiving, database, server, fulfillment, fulfilling, user prompt, compare input, database, verification, prompt question, display information, change information, downloadable format, customer-generated information, business-generated information, customized promotion, website, email, standard mail, facsimile, statement information, order information, sales history, order information (historical), set period of time, customer-generated, billing information, credit card number, expiration date, notifying or prompting, update, display preferences, personal information, service initiation preferences, delivery, preferences, status of request, request received, request fulfilled, cost (fulfilling request), notification, user interface, default request, storing, delivering.